Coal Fly Ash Release

Frequently Asked Questions

• What is coal fly ash?

Coal fly ash is a gray, powdery, mineral-like material that is leftover after coal is burned. The TVA Kingston Plant burns coal to produce energy. The coal fly ash is captured to keep it from causing air pollution. Coal ash is dusty. It is often kept wet to prevent it from being airborne. Coal ash does not readily dissolve. Wet coal ash is often called sludge.

• Is coal fly ash a hazardous waste?

Hazardous waste is a regulatory definition for waste disposal. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not classify coal fly ash as a hazardous waste. Something that is classified as a hazardous waste is considered more likely to cause harm or to spread in the environment. Therefore, hazardous wastes must go in special landfills for proper disposal. Substances that are not classified as hazardous waste can still be hazardous to your health.

• Can coal ash be hazardous to my health?

Coal ash contains small amounts of heavy metals that may be harmful. The powdery coal fly ash is not harmful if touched. It washes off with soap and water. However, if you were to breathe or eat a lot of coal ash, for a long time, it might irritate the respiratory system or cause other health effects.

• What can I do to avoid exposure?

Simply put, stay away from the coal ash as much as possible. Do not let your children or pets play in the coal ash. Wash your hands, clothes, and shoes if you do contact the ash.

If you do not come into contact with the coal fly ash, you will not be exposed to it. If you are not exposed, there will be no risk of health effects to you or your family.

• Was there a health risk?

No. Regular testing of public drinking water, private well water, and the air did not show elevated levels of chemicals. Regular testing will continue to make sure the public is safe.

• What about arsenic?

Arsenic is present in coal ash. Some sediments and ash samples have shown elevated amounts of arsenic. For there to be an increased health risk, a person would need to breathe or eat ash for a long time. Testing has shown that the arsenic is not likely to be absorbed by the body.

• What about the future?

The coal ash release will need environmental testing for a long time to make sure the public it stays safe. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) posted its sampling plans at www.tn.gov/environment.

• Should I be tested for chemicals?

No. There are several heavy metals that may be in coal ash. Just because they are present does not mean that the chemicals got into your body. We do not recommend testing.

• What federal agencies have been involved with the response?

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mobilized their emergency response unit. Their team of experts included environmental specialists, risk assessors, and data managers. The EPA collected environmental samples that were tested to find out the concentrations. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) provided health assessors as part of the federal environmental response.

• What state agencies have been involved with the response?

A number of state agencies responded to the coal ash spill. They continue to make sure that it is cleaned up properly. The Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) is overseeing the cleanup and investigation into the cause of the release. TDEC continues independent sampling of air, drinking water, private well water, river water, soil, and ash.

The Tennessee Department of Health's (TDH) laboratory tested the environmental samples TDEC collected. TDH's health assessors determined whether adverse health effects were likely based on the environmental data. TDH went door-to-door to conduct a health needs assessment and to share health information with the community.

Before the spill, fish advisories were issued because of contamination in the Watts Bar Reservoir. The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) is conducting a fish tissue survey in the area near the coal ash spill. TDEC will determine whether any additional fish consumption advisories are needed based on the results. Fishing should be avoided in the lower section of the Emory River.

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) kept the emergency phase of the response organized and documented.

• Who decided that the levels of coal ash were safe to the public?

There were several agencies working to keep the public safe from the coal ash. The federal EPA and ATSDR employed scientists, risk assessors, and environmental specialists that decided the public was safe. TDEC and TDH also worked to make sure the public was safe after the coal ash spill. All of the environmental data showed no expected public health hazard. The public safety continues to be protected through both the independent and unified actions of these agencies.

• How were we protected from exposure to the coal ash release?

Many environmental tests were done and these will continue for the protection of public health. Air sampling has not indicated levels above ambient air quality standards. Testing of public drinking water has shown that the water is safe to drink. Well water results have not shown violations of primary drinking water standards. Water testing will continue. Also, samples of residential soil, river water, and coal ash have been tested. All of the data collected has been reviewed by state and federal environmental public health assessors.

If you have questions about your health and coal fly ash contact:

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